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Implications of a PLO Split Resulting
From Adoption by Arafat of Moderate Policies

This memorandum examines the likely implications of a major shift in policies by the Palestine Liberation Organization's leader Yasir Arafat, and a resultant split in the organization. It posits that Arafat, contrary to many observers' expectations, decides to break with his traditional penchant for an ambiguous policy inclination and gives Jordan's King Hussein a meaningful mandate to enter into direct negotiations with Israel (probably reserving PLO veto rights over the substantive elements of the talks) and also issues a statement recognizing Israel's de facto existence (although probably not its "right" to exist). Such a policy reversal appears unlikely but is possible. An examination of its implications illustrates why Arafat has been reluctant to move in this direction.

A key element in PLO policy formulation on this subject is Arafat's calculation of the likely US response. Arafat would want to ascertain in advance of such a shift the American quid pro quo. This paper assumes that the US responds to the PLO initiative by holding publicized direct discussions with PLO representatives and urges Israel to enter into talks with Hussein but does not recognize the PLO as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians" or use military and economic aid leverage to pressure Israel into major concessions on the West Bank and Gaza.

Reaction in the PLO

Arafat's actions would provoke a major crisis in the PLO and almost certainly cause the organization to split. The Syrians would play a major role in this process. President Assad has made no secret of his opposition to a closer Arafat-Hussein arrangement or to a recognition statement. While there is a remote chance Assad would try to jump on the peace "bandwagon" to avoid being isolated, it is far more likely Syria will strongly resist any PLO-Jordanian initiative.

Syrian surrogates in the PLO, principally Saiqa and the PFLP/GC, are not strong in numbers or political appeal, however, and Assad would have to try to wean other Palestinians away from Arafat to provoke a serious split. The upcoming Palestine National Council meeting in Algiers could be a critical testing ground of Syrian appeals.

A key target will be George Habbash's radical PFLP. Habbash has generally deferred to Arafat's leadership since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon began but he would be strongly tempted to break with Arafat in this scenario. Habbash doubtless has leadership ambitions and is a long-time opponent of recognizing Israel. The pro-Soviet Marxist DFLP would also be an important Syrian target. DFLP leader Hawatamah might stay with Arafat, however, since the two have worked closely together for some time. An important influence on the DFLP would be the Soviets.

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The most important targets for Syrian subversion of Arafat's influence would be within his own Fatah organization. Leftist Fatah leaders like Abu Salih would be unhappy with a move towards Amman and Washington. Salah Khalaf, better known as Abu Iyad, would also be pitched by the Syrians to break with Arafat.

Although Arafat enjoys unrivaled prestige within the Palestinian movement, his ability to hold his troops together would depend on several factors. Most critical will be his ability to produce results. US willingness to talk with the PLO would be vital.

Also important would be the Arab reaction. Jordan obviously would be supportive. Egypt and Morocco have both urged Arafat to move forward and presumably would back him. The Saudi reaction is less predictable but would probably also be positive (although Riyadh would seek to avoid an open break with Syria and might try to mediate between Arafat and Assad). Iraq would probably not play a key role given its preoccupation with Iran.

Even in the best circumstances Syria would gain some adherents. Some 270,000 Palestinians live in Syria. Moreover, PLO fighters in Syria and Syrian-occupied Lebanon -- currently the overwhelming majority -- could be disarmed by the Syrian military if they refused to break ranks with Arafat. Fatah could thus be denied the use of much of what remains of its military apparatus.

Nonetheless, we believe most of the PLO would remain loyal to Arafat. He might lose the PFLP and some leftists like Abu Salih, but most of Fatah and the PLO apparatus would, at least initially, back Arafat.

Terrorism Implications

The Syrians probably would gain the backing of those non-PLO Palestinian groups that have been actively engaged in international terrorism in recent years. These groups (principally May 15 and Black June) already have some connections with Damascus and probably would be willing to join any new anti-Arafat "Steadfastness" rival PLO.

More importantly, the Syrians might use these groups to initiate a terrorist campaign against Arafat and his supporters along the lines of the bloody Iraqi-Fatah feud in 1978. Jordanians might also be targeted and Assad could also seek to back up the terrorist intimidation by massing troops on the Jordanian border as he did in November 1980. Finally, the Syrians might seek to engage the services of other non-Palestinian terrorists like Carlos or ASALA (with whom they reportedly have also had contacts) to assist in plots against Arafat.

West Bank Reaction

West Bankers and Gazans would back Arafat for the most part. Although a few West Bank leaders have Syrian connections (ex-Nablus Mayor Bassam Shaka), most have long urged the PLO to accept Israel as a reality and join into the peace process actively. This support might ebb, however, if Arafat failed to get results, especially from Israel.

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Implications for the US

Would the peace process be assisted or hampered by the PLO joining the negotiating process and splitting as a result? On balance, we believe it would be a positive development. A PLO shorn of its most extreme elements, and perhaps induced through the internal debate necessary to produce a position leading to US-PLO negotiations, would produce both a weaker Palestinian movement and one more clearly committed to a political solution than at present. This would be a desirable development, and would probably mean that a somewhat weakened PLO would see that it needed to ally itself with Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia in order to keep from drifting into obscurity, and perhaps more importantly in order to stand up to the opposition from Syria and more hard line Palestinian elements.

If, by chance, a split within the PLO proves to be more serious and to have deeper consequences, it could mean that the PLO as a whole is reduced in importance in the future, and that it also might ultimately allow negotiations to proceed with Jordan and West Bank Palestinians playing the lead role. For the moment, however, the PLO can do one thing that no one else can do in the Arab world: that is to legitimize peace between Israel and the Palestinians. A PLO shorn of its rejectionist elements could do this nearly as well. If a PLO leadership, presumably consisting of Arafat and his colleagues, could be convinced to take the step of recognizing Israel, even with conditions attached, it would have historic importance and would make it difficult for any other Arab party to continue to deny Israel's existence. It is for this reason that cooptation of the Arafat portion of the PLO into the peace process seems to be a preferable development to that of total exclusion, even if this action leads to a breakoff of the PLO's radical factions.

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PL0 Forces Under
Syrian Control/Influence

Lebanon	13,000 - 16,000
Syria	5,300



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